

Testimony

Senate Bill 2208

Senate Transportation Committee

Friday, January 28, 2005; 11 a.m.

North Dakota Department of Health

Good morning, Chairman Trenbeath and members of the Senate Transportation Committee. My name is Carol Meidinger, and I am director of the North Dakota Department of Health's Injury Prevention Program, which coordinates child passenger safety activities in the state. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 2208.

Senate Bill 2208 has two primary components. First, it increases the age for children required to ride in a child restraint from age 4 to age 7. Second, it adds a monetary fee of \$25 for violation of the child restraint requirement. Current law has a penalty of one point with no monetary fee.

Increasing the age for child restraint use would make North Dakota's law more consistent with recommendations from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Current North Dakota law allows a 4-year-old to use a seat belt. Seat belts, however, are not designed for young children. The shoulder belt crosses the neck or face, and the lap portion rides high on the tummy, not down on the hips. The shoulder belt often is placed under the child's arm (a very dangerous practice) or behind the child's back. In a crash, improperly fitting seat belts can cause internal injuries, spinal cord damage or ejection from the vehicle.

The solution is for parents to use booster seats for children who weigh from 40 pounds to 80 pounds and who are less than 4 feet, 8 inches tall. Most children do not reach that weight and height until they are between 6 and 8 years of age. The booster seat raises the child up, helping to keep the lap belt low on the hips and the shoulder belt centered on the shoulder and chest.

Parents are often confused about the difference between what is "safest" for their children and what is "legal." They believe that because the law allows their children to use seat belts at age 4, it is safe to do so.

If passed, Senate Bill 2208 should not create a financial burden on parents. Booster seats are available through local car seat distribution programs for parents who cannot

afford to purchase one. The programs do request a small donation that goes back into the program to purchase additional car seats. Booster seats are also available at stores and cost less than \$20 for a low-back booster and about \$30 for a high-back booster.

The North Dakota Department of Health is committed to helping parents provide safe and appropriate transportation for children of all ages. We currently have car seat distribution programs throughout the state. We conduct car safety seat checkups to assist parents in proper use of their car seats, and we provide training to local agency staff so they can help parents in their communities. We have been promoting the use of booster seats for the last couple of years with our “Boost, Then Buckle” Campaign, and we will continue these activities. However, the Department of Health believes our efforts would be more effective if North Dakota law supported the recommendations we give to parents.

The Department of Health would appreciate your favorable response to Senate Bill 2208. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.